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Confessional poetry & the artifice of honesty

by [David Yezzi](#)

On the legacy of confessional poetry, occasioned by Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*

[To] stand before you speechless and intelligent and shaking with shame, rejected yet confessing out the soul to conform to the rhythm of thought in his naked and endless head, ...

—Allen Ginsberg, “Howl”

*Honesty, little slut, must you insist
On hearing every dirty word I know
And all my worst affairs? Are impotence,
Insanity, and lying what you lust for?
Your hands are cold, feeling me in the dark.*

—Edgar Bowers, “To the Contemporary Muse”

Earlier this year, the London *Times* led the fanfare for Ted Hughes’s *Birthday Letters* with this front-page banner headline: “Revealed: the most tragic literary love story of our time.” Hughes’s long silence over his life with Sylvia Plath gave way to a din of publicity. There were fawning symposia; prominent first-serial publications; and lengthy articles rehashing the familiar story of celebrity and suicide in all its lurid journalistic appeal. Then came the renewed hubbub from critics on both sides of the thirty-five-year-old debate over who was in fact the victim here—the silent woman (as Janet Malcolm has termed her), Sylvia Plath, a young American genius horribly wronged and survived these many years by her unfeeling husband; or the silent man silent no longer, Ted Hughes, that great lowing ox of British letters, England’s hoary poet laureate, and Plath’s unjustly vilified and long-suffering literary executor. With few exceptions, the book’s positive reviews were as exorbitant as its sales.

Autobiography has been doing big business lately, and, as a prominent installment in the series of bestselling memoirs (albeit in verse), *Birthday Letters* has achieved perhaps the highest visibility of any, outstripping for media attention recent efforts in prose by Mary Karr, Kathryn Harrison, and Caroline Knapp—and quite likely the latest, by Lillian Ross, which is just now making its way. As memoirs go, Hughes’s story will be hard to beat. A poetry-prize-winning Smith graduate on a Fulbright to Cambridge meets a smolderingly virile European writer at a party; she leaves that night without her hairband, he with (bleeding?) teeth marks. In months, they are married. Accoutering the drama are kids, betrayals, and breakdowns amid a cast of literati both British and American. The domestic tragedy ends with the heroine’s suicide in the family home at the age of thirty, her talent’s

potential a mystery forever.

With its built-in emotional firepower, *Birthday Letters* is poetry for people who ordinarily would never pick up the stuff—and no surprise, really. The whole narrative plays into the popular image of what a poet should be: tortured, beautiful, and *famous*. In a self-regarding passage from her bestselling book *Prozac Nation*, the glamorous young memoirist Elizabeth Wurtzel pretty much puts her finger on it: at a New York party Wurtzel finds herself in a funk and sprawled on a bathroom floor; from the depths of her lithiumless despond she compares herself to Plath and Anne Sexton as well as to a movie star. If Wurtzel's experience is any gauge, for many a disconsolate twenty-something it's a one-to-one correspondence: Winona Ryder, Sylvia Plath. There's nothing particularly novel about placing the artist at the center of the starry universe (or about the artist placing himself there); it's a vanity at least as old as Romanticism. It is this Romantic image of the poet as a personally suffering channeler for emotion and experience that clings to Plath and to her fellow confessional poets Sexton, W. D. Snodgrass, and Robert Lowell. That two of the four were suicides (all were analysands) cruelly adds to our fascination with them.

Poetry itself rarely generates headlines, and the story perhaps missed in all the furor over *Birthday Letters* is that of the confessionals, to which Hughes's book provides an illuminating coda. Hughes is not thought of as writing in a confessional or autobiographical mode, yet it is an obvious one for his chosen subject. (Whether or not it makes for good poetry is another matter.) Confessionalism, despite Plath's prominent role in it, remains a quieter affair than the Hughes-Plath saga but one that has been no less divisive for contemporary writers and critics. Given the lasting popularity of the confessional poets among still-widening circles of readers, they, and their successors, the "postconfessionals," may emerge in years to come as the most influential group of American poets after 1959.

More than any other school, confessional poetry directly and vociferously opposed the "impersonality" argued for by T. S. Eliot in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." If Eliot's credo was upheld by the New Critics—and by the poets writing during "the tranquilized *Fifties*" (as Lowell deemed them) including Richard Wilbur, Donald Justice, Howard Nemerov, and Anthony Hecht—then by the end of that decade the tide had turned measurably.

What distinguishes confessional poetry's management of autobiography from that of, say, the New York school, and from the lyric in general, is the rawness of its address and the incorporation of guilty personal detail for emotional effect. All poets use their lives for poetry, but not all lives are used similarly. Often the particulars of a poet's life provide the basis for more general speculation, which constitutes the poem's bid for universality. Conversely, in confessional poetry such details can serve to deny universality by delineating the poet as apart and uniquely suffering. The "I" of the poem is meant as a direct representation of the flesh-and-blood poet. Through its enumeration of sins, the confessional poem emerges as a tragic self-portrait, its words inscribed, like Kafka's penal commandments, directly onto the hide of the writer.

Confessionalism is a question of degree. What makes a poem confessional is not only its subject matter—e.g., family, sex, alcoholism, madness—or the emphasis on self, but also the directness with which such things are handled. Unflinching and generally extreme in their diction and address (certainly compared to what preceded them), the poems of Snodgrass, Lowell, Sexton, and Plath comprise a wide tonal range from sad whisper to hectoring squawk. What they have in common, what sets them apart from other poems that incorporate details from life, is their sense of worn-on-the-sleeve self-revelation and their artful simulation of sincerity. By relying on facts, on "real" situations and relationships, for a poem's emotional authenticity, the poet makes an artifice of honesty. Confessional poems, in other words, lie like truth.

Nineteen fifty-nine was the *annus mirabilis* of confessional poetry, the year that Lowell's *Life*

Studies and Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle* were published. Snodgrass's book won the Pulitzer Prize; Lowell's, the National Book Award. It was in Lowell's acceptance speech that he expounded his notion (with a nod to Claude Lévi-Strauss) of the "raw" and the "cooked." Lowell distinguished between the symbolic, formally restrained, carefully reasoned poetry championed by the New Criticism on the one hand, and the fervor and associative logic of a new personalized poetic on the other. For Lowell, poetry had fallen into a staid, overly decorous kind of expression, into which his rough emotionalism and expanded subject matter were meant to inject new life. Wilbur, an exemplar of the cooked poet, saw it another way. Years earlier, in John Ciardi's *Mid-Century American Poets* (1950), Wilbur stated that

some writers think of art as a window, and some think of it as a door. If art is a window, then the poem is something intermediate in character, limited, synecdochic, a partial vision of a part of the world... . If art is conceived to be a door ... the artist no longer perceives a wall between him and the world; the world becomes an extension of himself, and is deprived of its reality. The poet's words cease to be a means of liaison with the world; they take the place of the world. This is bad aesthetics—and incidentally, bad morals.

The questionable morality that Wilbur describes is more or less that of Emerson, who, with Whitman ("I am the man, I suffered, I was there"), laid the groundwork of American Romanticism. Emerson envisioned the poet as possessing direct access to the divine, as a creature of noble impulses fettered by the intellect, and as a conduit of pure expression. One does not have to consider deeply to imagine the dangers inherent in this excessive form of egotism, where impulse is unchecked by reason and a first-thought-best-thought automatism is offered as the highest artistic achievement. The extremism of Emersonian expansiveness was to a great extent tempered in the first half of this century by Eliot's notion of the escape from personality and emotion. By mid-century, however, the poetry associated with the New Criticism began to give way to a wide swing back in the other direction. What poets such as Lowell championed was a poetry based more directly on personal experience. Extending Wilbur's metaphor, the poet Mark Doty has noted in his essay "The 'Forbidden Planet' of Character: The Revolutions of the 1950s" (1991) that "a generation of poets would then find it necessary not only to open the windows but to break them, to widen them into doors, and the result would be a revisioning of the entire house."

Confessionalism, while largely an aesthetic rather than a political movement, found strong parallels in the social unease of the late 1950s and the upheavals of the 1960s. At the fore of this aesthetic-cultural shift away from traditional forms (and mores) was that "angelheaded hipster" of the counterculture, Allen Ginsberg. Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* (1956) set the precedent for the new sexualized and radicalized poetry of self. In addition to expanding the possibilities for poetic subject matter, Ginsberg instigated a trend toward self-revelation (which for him, and for poets such as Adrienne Rich, took on a shrill revolutionary cast). The critic M. L. Rosenthal, in his review of *Howl* for *The Nation*, characterized this new poetry as follows:

We have had smoking attacks on the civilization before, ironic or murderous or suicidal. We have *not* had this particular variety of anguished anathema-hurling in which the poet's revulsion is expressed with the single-minded frenzy of a raving madman.

Ginsberg hurls, not only curses, but *everything*—his own paranoid memories of a confused, squalid, humiliating existence in the "underground" of American life and culture, [as well as] mock political and sexual "confessions." ...

... It is further evidence, the most telling yet, perhaps, of the Céline-ization of nonconformist attitudes in America... . Homogenize the dominant culture enough, destroy the channels of communication blandly enough, and you will have little Mad

Bombers everywhere.

(Is it any wonder that Ted Kaczynski's a fan of Paul Goodman?) Ginsberg's "new active Romanticism," Rosenthal later observed in *The New York Times Book Review*,

mirror[s] something that has been going on for a long time—the discrediting by many people of traditional concepts of a nobly disciplined life... .

The year after the appearance of *Howl*, Lowell began a reading tour of the West Coast that would alter profoundly his early style of *Lord Weary's Castle* and *The Mills of the Kavanagh's*. "At the time," Lowell explained in an interview, "poetry reading was sublimated by the practice of Allen Ginsberg. I was still reading my old New Criticism religious, symbolic poems... . Audiences didn't understand, and I didn't always understand myself while reading." "I began to have a certain disrespect for the tight forms," he later admitted. Ginsberg's in-your-face rant, while it cleared new territory for Lowell to move onto, was far from the voice Lowell adopted for *Life Studies*—what the British poet and critic A. Alvarez has called Lowell's more "dispassionate artistic use of material salvaged from the edge of breakdown." Lowell, as a favorite of Allen Tate and a contributor to the inaugural issue of the *Kenyon Review* in 1938, embodied the change from the New Criticism to the confessional. While influenced by Ginsberg, he was too fine a poet to give over entirely to the "barbaric yawp" of the Beats.

Closer in tone to the Lowell of the late Fifties are the poems of William DeWitt Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle*. Snodgrass, one of Lowell's students at Iowa, included in his volume poems on the dissolution of his marriage and his fear of estrangement from his young daughter. "Daughter poems" sound a tonic chord in confessionalism with famous examples by Snodgrass, Lowell, Sexton, and Plath. A comparison of these poems reveals the progress of confessional poetry as it descended from the ease of Snodgrass into the violence of Plath.

Just as suicide (Plath's and Sexton's) marked the end of confessional poetry, it marked the beginning as well. As a student at Iowa in the Fifties, a young poet named Robert Shelley began writing poems in a direct style that broke with the fragmented poetry of his peers. He had only completed a handful of these lyrics before taking his own life. As Shelley's fellow student and friend, Snodgrass was taken with this new style and eventually adopted it as his own. Snodgrass's teachers at Iowa, who included Berryman as well as Lowell, he tells us, "really taught me how to pack a poem with meaning, and from that it's a fairly easy jump to how to pack a poem with feeling, which to me tells a lot more." This jump to emotion was a defining move of confessionalism. In his book's title sequence, "Heart's Needle," Snodgrass portrays in delicately turned verses the strained relationship between himself and his daughter. The poem is meant to play directly on the heart strings of the reader:

This Hallowe'en you come one week.
You masquerade

as a vermilion, sleek,
fat, crosseyed fox in the parade
or, where grim jackolanterns leer,

go with your bag from door to door
foraging for treats. How queer:

when you take off your mask
my neighbors must forget and ask

whose child you are.

Of course you lose your appetite,

whine and won't touch your plate;
as local law

I set your place on an orange crate
in your own room for days. At night

you lie asleep there on the bed
and grate your jaw.

Assuredly your father's crimes
are visited

on you. You visit me sometimes.

The time's up. Now your pumpkin sees

me bringing your suitcase.

He holds his grin;
the forehead shrivels, sinking in.
You break this year's first crust of snow

off the runningboard to eat.

We manage, though for days
I crave sweets when you leave and know
they rot my teeth. Indeed our sweet
foods leave us cavities.

Lowell admired Snodgrass's ability to risk sentimentality without succumbing to it: "There's some way of distinguishing," Lowell told an interviewer, "between false sentimentality, which is blowing up a subject and giving emotions that you don't feel, and using whimsical, minute, tender, small emotions which most people don't feel" but which, Lowell insisted, Snodgrass did. Snodgrass's tact with regard to the elusive distinction between heightened emotion and false sentimentality is what separates his poems from subsequent strains of confessionalism. "Heart's Needle" employs clean phrasing and a caution with regard to the poet's precarious emotional situation that later poetry in this vein would eschew.

Aside from its occasional datedness ("How queer," "runningboard"), the poem's diction has aged well. Though it's better than most postconfessional personal lyrics, the poem could be written today: such bald statements and unmediated self-regard have become commonplaces. Snodgrass's emotional needs are given center stage. "To know one's needs is really to know one's own limits, hence one's definition," Snodgrass has written. By understanding "needs" as defining "limits," the poet becomes the sum of his desires; by definition, then, he is not so much unfulfilled as unfulfillable. This unhappy state too often gives way to a mawkish self-pity that undermines Snodgrass and his fellows.

Another characteristic that Snodgrass shares with Lowell, Sexton, and Plath is his use of associative logic, which helps to supplant reason with emotion. While on the surface playful, Snodgrass's non sequitur leaps suggest a mind buckling under the strain: "Assuredly your father's crimes/ are visited/

on you. You visit me sometimes.// The time's up." The prickliest reference in the poem—to the sins of the father—seems to jolt Snodgrass off balance as he limps from thought to thought over tenuous bridges of wordplay. It's as if in all the emotional honesty, he can no longer think straight.

Similarly racing is Lowell's mind in "Home After Three Months Away," one of his daughter poems from *Life Studies*:

Three months, three months!
Is Richard now himself again?
Dimpled with exaltation,
my daughter holds her levee in the tub.
Our noses rub,
each of us pats a stringy lock of hair—
they tell me nothing's gone.
Though I am forty-one,
not forty now, the time I put away
was child's-play. After thirteen weeks
my child still dabs her cheeks
to start me shaving. When
we dress her in her sky-blue corduroy,
she changes to a boy,
and floats my shaving brush
and washcloth in the flush... .
Dearest, I cannot loiter here
in lather like a polar bear.

Neither can Lowell loiter on a thought. The poem, bordering on the sentimental, takes place on the poet's first weekend visit home from McLean Hospital where he has been committed and undergoing treatment for manic-depression. The poignancy of the closing couplet, as Lowell's biographer Ian Hamilton points out, is increased by knowing that Lowell may not "loiter" in the added sense of having to return to the hospital. In recuperation, Lowell "'came to' sad, worried, always ashamed and fearful," Lowell's second wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, has explained. This nervous energy that she describes seems just below the surface of this poem for Harriet, Lowell's daughter with Hardwick: the poem fidgets, restively skipping back and forth between outward and inward observation. As the critic Donald Davie has put it, "Now we have once again poems in which the public life of the author as author, and his private life, are messily compounded, so that one needs the adventitious information of the gossip-columnist to take the force or even the literal meaning of what, since it is a work of literary art, is supposedly offered as public utterance." Of course, much can be gotten from Lowell's poetry without such special knowledge, but not everything.

In the opening of "Home After Three Months Away," Lowell sets the scene with biographical detail:

Gone now the baby's nurse,
a lioness who ruled the roost
and made the Mother cry.
She used to tie
gobbets of porkrind in bowknots of gauze—
three months they hung like soggy toast
on our eight foot magnolia tree,
and helped the English sparrows

weather a Boston winter.

This account is an artist's admixture of fact and fiction. The nurse was, in fact, let go and did on one occasion make Harriet's mother, Hardwick, cry. She did not, however, leave out unseemly snacks for the birds; this was the practice of Lowell's nextdoor neighbor. Tampering with the facts, of course, does not weaken the poem, just the opposite. It is the poetic strategy of presenting them as facts that poses the greatest difficulty. As Lowell admitted in a *Paris Review* interview, "There's a good deal of tinkering with fact [in *Life Studies*] ... the reader was to believe he was getting the *real* Robert Lowell." Lowell handled this illusion of honesty, in the main, with seriousness and responsibility. With Plath and Sexton, such "honesty" feels more like emotional strongarming. Lowell, in describing his recovery, manages to convey the "whimsical, minute, tender, small emotions" that he revered in Snodgrass. Too often, Plath and Sexton succumb to "blowing up a subject" in a way that Lowell equated with "false sentimentality."

A responsibility accompanies the transformation of one's own image into art. Over confessional poetry, Davie argues, "falls the shadow of a divided purpose: the poet confesses to discreditable sentiments or behavior, but in doing so he demands credit for having the courage or the honesty of his shamelessness." Like Lowell, Anne Sexton, a stalwart of such poetic shamelessness, came to confessionalism in part through the writing of Snodgrass, whose "Heart's Needle," she gushed, "grew like a bone inside of my heart." Sexton attended a week-long workshop at Antioch College expressly to study with Snodgrass (she later studied with Lowell at Boston University), but her own poetry displays a more extreme sensibility, as shown by such titles as "The Abortion," "Menstruation at Forty," "Suicide Note," "The Breast," "In Celebration of My Uterus," "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator," "Dreaming the Breasts," and "God's Backside."

Written in the fall of 1958 and addressed to her daughter Joyce (nicknamed "Joy"), Sexton's "Double Image" was begun under the direct influence of Snodgrass. The long poem incorporates in its seven sections details taken from Sexton's mental disorder, hospitalization, family custody battles, and multiple suicide attempts:

I am thirty this November.
You are still small, in your fourth year.
We stand watching the yellow leaves go queer,
flapping in the winter rain,
falling flat and washed. And I remember
mostly the three autumns you did not live

here.
They said I'd never get you back again.
I tell you what you'll never really know:
all the medical hypothesis
that explained my brain will never be as true

as these
struck leaves letting go.

I, who chose two times
to kill myself, had said your nickname
the mewling months when you first came;
until a fever rattled
in your throat and I moved like a pantomime

above your head. Ugly angels spoke to me.

The blame,
I heard them say, was mine. They tattled
like green witches in my head, letting doom
leak like a broken faucet;
as if doom had flooded my belly and filled

your bassinet,
an old debt I must assume.

The poem, published in Sexton's first collection, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), reads like an alloy of "Heart's Needle" and "Home After Three Months Away." As in Lowell, the poet's age is stated, as well as the poet's period of separation from the daughter. Both poets employ metaphors for psychic unease: for Lowell it's tulips in the snow; for Sexton, leaves in the rain. But where Lowell conveys his mental disturbance ("I keep no rank nor station./ Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small") with modulation and restraint, Sexton goes for broke. Doom engulfs the poet at the end of the passage quoted above like some oozing creature from a B horror film. Occasionally, Sexton happens on a lovely turn of phrase ("these/ struck leaves letting go"), but the nursery language she often used to creepy effect seems willed here. It's hard to say which is worse, Sexton's blandly disclosed suicide attempts, or the fact that she's directing all of it to her daughter. Sexton's woeful inability to see beyond herself isn't moving, it's depressing.

Sexton's complaint later in the poem that "There is no special God to refer to; or if there is,/ why did I let you grow/ in another place," apart from being a sentimental cliché, plays into an important observation made by the critic Charles Molesworth:

In the poetry of Plath and Sexton, we find not only the subject matter but the structure of their imagination returning again and again to an irreducible choice: either the poet must become God or resign consciousness altogether. Haunted by the failed myth of a human, or at least an artistic, perfectibility, they turned to a courtship of nihilism. The suicides of Plath and Sexton ... come into starkest relief not against the myth of the alienated modern artist, but rather against the ruptured gigantism of their own egos.

To invert Wilbur's formulation, not only is this bad morals, it's also bad aesthetics. One could argue that Sexton's poems are perfect expressions of a troubled mind; the trick in poetry is not to succumb to an imitation of inner chaos but to render it as precisely as possible from the outside, to view it through a wider angle than the poet's own myopia.

Sylvia Plath's poems, like Sexton's, poach on already charged icons for emotional effect. For Plath and Sexton, God was a sitting duck (so were Nazis). Where Sexton might write "She is the house./ He is the steeple./ When they fuck they are God," Plath would intone "The grasses unload their griefs on my feet as if I were God." Lest anyone misunderstand, these lines are not serious musings on the nature of the divine; rather, they rely on some travesty of divinity for an emotional lift. In "The God," from *Birthday Letters*, Ted Hughes makes his own observations on Plath's dark obsession with divinity:

"God is speaking through me," you told me.
"Don't say that," I cried. "Don't say that.
That is horribly unlucky!"
As I sat there with blistering eyes
Watching everything go up

In the flames of your sacrifice
That finally caught you too till you
Vanished, exploding
Into the flames
Of the story of your God
Who embraced you
And your Mummy and your Daddy—
Your Aztec, Black Forest
God of the euphemism Grief.

(Hughes's poems in his recent collection read like middling Sexton with an infusion from Anglo-Saxon—"Your God snuffed up the fatty reek.") After reading "The God," one turns to Plath's *Ariel* (1965) and rereads "Daddy," Plath's daughter poem in reverse. When Plath wasn't deifying herself, she was deifying and un-deifying the figure of her father ("a bag full of God") for the purpose of ridicule:

I have always been scared of *you*,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat mustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O you——

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
But no less a devil for that, no not
Any less than the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.

It is possible to admire the originality, the keening and crackle, of Plath's screed, yet to remain deeply suspicious of the ego that would equate filial grief with the atrocities of the Holocaust. Such an inflation of emotion, to recall Lowell's thinking on the matter, seems a particularly dangerous form of sentimentality—not to mention solipsism. Such magnesium flashes of emotion are blinding, not illuminating. Plath's antic intensifications can feel deeply dispiriting.

In 1958, Plath audited—with Sexton—Lowell's poetry class at Boston University. (The three also have in common McLean Hospital, where at various times each underwent treatment.) Plath wrote that, in their poetry class, Lowell "sets me up with Anne Sexton, an honor I suppose," but the two

became only distant friends and very different poets. For Sexton getting out the “story” was paramount, while for Plath, a far more striking poet in the end, the aim was to transform the personal into a private symbolic language. What the two poets shared was their emotional extremism. As Plath put it, “My main thing now is to start with real things; real emotions, and leave out the baby gods ... and get into me, Ted, friends, mother and brother and father and family. The real world. Real situations, behind which the great gods play the drama of blood, lust and death.”

Reading “Daddy” is like visiting a patient in a burn unit: the power of the poetry derives from our realization that recovery—if possible—may only be partial. Lowell at one point admitted that some people might read his poems out of a fascination with the guilty biographical material recounted there. This same extraliterary fascination elevated Plath’s readership, after the publication of *The Bell Jar* (1963) and *Ariel*, into something approaching a cult. It is ironic that Plath’s poetry, which transformed biography into a highly original iconography of hate and despair, would become inseparable from the details of her life for subsequent generations of readers.

With *Birthday Letters*, Hughes shows us another important aspect of the story, but the “story” does a disservice to his poetry. Hughes strains under a divided duty: to serve the poems and to serve the facts. While affecting in passages, the book most often founders under the weight of its own biographical and psychological content. Even so, despite the renewed feminist attacks that accompanied the appearance of the *Letters*, Hughes the man has triumphed: if his goal was partly a measure of exoneration (private or public), then he has got it. He’s made his case. What he has not done is return to the height of his poetic powers. This to a good extent may be a problem of autobiographical poetry these many years after confessionalism; for the best poets of the late Fifties and early Sixties, and most notably for Lowell, a poem could not subsist on biography alone—it still can’t.

David Yezzi's latest collection of poems is *Azores* (Swallow Press).

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